

The Obscene Body/Politic

Author(s): Carolee Schneemann

Source: Art Journal, Vol. 50, No. 4, Censorship II (Winter, 1991), pp. 28-35

Published by: College Art Association

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/777320

Accessed: 29-08-2017 16:47 UTC

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The Obscene Body/Politic

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

ullets of projection are aimed into our bodies: tra-jectories of phallocratic apprehension produce our "wounds." A smoking gun grasped in that frozen hand. There's a cock/dick tracing this Saturday Night Special directed at our "privates." Word play/gun play focus sexual frame-up, the dissolve, deception—the veritable sleight of hand by which patriarchal culture constructs its myths, imposes superstitions on "the facts of life." Projection deforms perception of the female body. As bizarrely consecrated in Western creation myths as Athena emerging from Zeus's head; as usurpative of Mother Right as the birth of Dionysus from his father's thigh; as biologically contorted as a Lord Jesus born from the body of a virgin mother. Political and personal violence against women is twined behind/ within this stunting defeminization of history. For many of us, the layers of implicit and explicit censorship constructing our social history combine with contemporary contradictions to force our radicalization.

Even though we live in the best of times—as our reading, writing, research, and creative preeminence attest—one out of four of us will be subjected to rape; but we will not have been torn from our childhood sleep for a brutal clitoral excision (still practiced in some Islamic cultures in Africa, parts of Egypt and the Sudan, and most recently introduced into France by workers from these places). We will not have endured the probable fifteen pregnancies of our fertile years (forbidden contraception or abortion); so we are less likely to have died giving birth; we will not be burned as witches or sold into slavery, and even the most transgressive among us may evade being locked up in an asylum.

The burgeoning recent work of women in the arts is fueled by three thousand years of fracture—the masculist enforcement of self-righteous institutionalizations that have dogged our heels. My anger, when I first discovered this subtle and pervasive censorship, this excision, paralleled my later rage and confusion at being denied a feminine pronoun (The artist, he . . . Everyone will hand up his hat . . . Creative man and his images) and upon discovering that my culture denies females an honorable genital. My sexuality was idealized, fetishized, but the organic experience of my own body was referred to as defiling, stinking, contaminating. Bible study and graffiti under the train trestle shared a common deprecation. History, sexuality, and naming were

subsumed, contorted. I would have to be "a spy in the house of art." 1

Clearly our lost and splintered history, and the ways we now integrate our creativity and sexuality, have demanded feminist explication. Women artists explore erotic imagery because our bodies exemplify a historic battleground—we are dismantling conventional sexual ideology and its punishing suppressions—and because our experience of our bodies has not corresponded to cultural depiction.

Suppression and exclusion affected my early painting in various confusing ways, starting with the acceptance and then expulsion of a nude self-portrait from a student exhibition at Bard College. In another incident, a painting of my companion (boyfriend, James Tenney), naked and asleep (figs. 1 and 2), was the object of a joke by faculty and students concerning the inclusion of his penis (as an attribute of an actual male person they knew.) Next, a gallery invited me to exhibit and then refused to hang a nude photographic sequence titled Eye Body, made in 1963. It introduced images of a shamanic ritual of the sacred erotic at a time when the female nude dwelled mainly in girlie magazines, pornographic detective fictions, photographic reports on "primitive natives," classical Western painting, Abstract Expressionist dis-memberments, and the iconic, frontal-spread paper dolls of Pop art. Could there be any other erotic iconography?

In 1962 I created a loft environment, built of large panels of interlocked, rhythmic color units, broken mirrors and glass, lights, motorized umbrellas. I then wanted to combine my actual body with this work, as an integral material—a further dimension to this construction, a ritualized set of physical transformations. The work that resulted was *Eye Body*:

Covered in paint, grease, chalk, ropes, plastic, I establish my body as visual territory. Not only am I an image-maker, but I explore the image values of flesh as material I choose to work with. The body may remain erotic, sexual, desired, desiring but it is as well votive: marked, written over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will.²

Among the thirty-six "transformative actions" of *Eye Body* is a photograph of me; it is a frontal nude with two garden snakes crawling on my torso.³ The affinity of this image to that of the Cretan serpent goddess only later became apparent to me as



FIG. 1 Carolee Schneemann, Personae (J. T. & 3 Kitch's), 1958, oil on canvas, 32 × 50 inches. Private collection.



FIG. 2 Carolee Schneemann, Fur Landscape, 1963, fur and house paint, 34 × 72 × 3 inches. Collection of the artist.

my research into early gynocratic cultures deepened. The image is disturbing and attractive because of its association with an archaic eroticism, but its contemporary confrontation with taboos remains to be addressed.

One of the startling aspects of this image of my naked body is that it includes a visible clitoris. Western, masculist art history has been obsessed with the female nude, but the image of a contemporary artist as a genitally sexed nude sets off a tireless round of inquisition: what is the meaning of this "obscene" image? Why is it in the art world rather than a "porno" world? Images such as this one from Eye Body became classic referents as feminist art historians explored the sacred erotic, the shamanic body, and archetypal linkage to ancient goddess figures, which I had not yet seen in 1963 (fig. 3). But the initial reaction of curators and critics I then respected was that these images were narcissistic and lewd. I was told, "If you want to run around naked, don't bother the art world; if you want to paint, go and paint."

A measure of this Western psychosis was clarified when I realized there were only two roles offered for me to fulfill: either that of "pornographer" or that of emissary of Aphrodite. Both elude political and social affect insofar as these roles both function as dumping grounds that cloud constructed differences between the erotic and the obscene.

In 1964 censorship danced around my Kinetic Theater work *Meat Joy*, which I thought of as an erotic rite to *enliven* my guilty culture. Conceived for the Festival of Free Expression in Paris, organized by Jean-Jacques Lebel, it was first performed there, at the Centre Culturel Américain, then in London, and then at Judson Memorial Church in New York, where I had choreographed for the Judson Dance Theater and developed other Kinetic Theater works (*fig. 4*). I had intended the performers to be nude; the moral-decency rules in France at that time stipulated that naked male and female performers were subject to arrest *if they moved*; they could remain in the frozen positions of statues without breaking the law. In New York, moving *or* frozen nudes in public were forbidden. I devised scanty feather-and-fur coverings for our active group of nine performers.

In both the Paris and New York audiences, informants from the local police stations and from various "moraldecency" groups were present. A truncated version of the performance at Vauxhall in London ended abruptly when police entered one door as we performers exited another,

unexpectedly her research



Eye Body, 1963 Thirty-six transformative actions



Four Fur Cutting Boards (detail), 1963 kinetic painting

into the archaic goddess figurations



Eye Body Thirty-six transformative actions: garden snakes



Minoan priestess, 2000 B.C. (serpent attributes)

revealed striking precedents for



Still from Fuses, 1965 16-mm film



Sculpture, Zaire

images of her lived actions



From Body Collage, 1968 performance sequence



Cretan ritual bull jumper, 2000 B.C.

each equivalence is discovered



Eye Body
Thirty-six transformative actions:
in kinetic-construction "Ice Box"



"Ice Box" (detail)

after months or after years



From *Body Collage*, 1968 performance sequence



Owl goddess, New Guinea

the energy which drove



Still life from Fuses orgasmic heads (self-shot)



Lions mating

concept to occupy her own body



From Interior Scroll, 1976 performance



Vulva goddess, Nigeria

covered in blankets, to be hidden on the floors of cars speeding away. During the Paris performance a man from the audience came onstage, pushed me against the wall, and tried to strangle me. I was saved by three older women who had never seen any performance, but were convinced that this assault was not part of it.

Eye Body, 1963, Meat Joy, 1964, and my film Fuses, 1965, form a trio of works whose shameless eroticism emerged from within a culture that has lost and denied its sensory connections to dream, myth, and the female powers, (fig. 5). The very fact that these works remain active in the cultural imagination has to do with latent content that the culture is still eager to suppress.

How could a twenty-four-year-old artist insist, "This is the truth"? Some other artists had a sense of affiliation with the power of my images. But in 1963–64 there was no theoretical structure to ground what I was doing, no feminist analysis to redress masculist tradition, no overt Jungian connection to a communal unconscious, no semiotic or anthropological scan of archetypes that could link our visual images to what I called then "primary cultures" (detesting the expression *primitive*).

It is also important to remember that there were no funding sources for performance art in the 1960s; the term, the concept, did not exist. There were wild, crazy Happenings, Fluxus, and Events—all produced with available trash, found objects, and willing collaborators. If we had then been applying to government agencies to support us, would forms of self-censorship have restricted our use of degraded materials, or impinged upon our considered disregard for the comfort of the audience? We came up out of the shadow world, identified with the suppressed irrational element of our culture. Our work seized dynamic implications of Abstract Expressionism to extend the active visual surface of painting into actual physical space and time, and to dematerialize the frame, the object, the aesthetic commodity.

There is something female about performance art itself: the way the body carries form and meaning into ephemeral space and actual time; the admittance of unconscious, forbidden material, dependent on self-exposure, self-display. There is a female sense of associative margins in which artists are a raw material, as nature is, moving freely in realms of the uncontrollable and suppressed. Performance developed generative forms without proscriptive mastery: expected (phallic) shaping. Interiority was our nexus, the source of discovery and of our sense of the immediacy of our physicality. Somewhere in the psyche these things connect with femaleness. Performance art embraced a wide range of taboos and social issues in a very brief time, because it was an open territory. The art world—the art industry (galleries,



FIG. 4 Carolee Schneemann, *Meat Joy*, performance at Judson Memorial Church, "Fish, Chickens, Sausage" sequence, New York, 1964.

collectors, magazines, critics, art departments)—had been wary of performance art. We were hard to commodify. We sprang out of the canvas and left them holding the brush, weighted as it was with the expressionistic painters' rending of private self into public event. I arrived in New York just in time to see my older painting heroes drunk, fighting, fucking, jumping through windows (sometimes in my loft), crashing their cars performing all the infantile heroics that diverted castration fantasies into symbolic inviolability. Most of the young guys I followed in initiating Happenings and Fluxus (the root of performance art) soon returned to sculpture and painting; by returning to objects they stabilized the economic direction of their careers. Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, and Red Grooms stopped performing early on; Al Hansen, Robert Whitman, and Allan Kaprow at times still present a performance or event; the Fluxus artists continue to produce both objects and actions. Among the women from my first years in New York, Yoko Ono, Alison Knowles, Charlotte Moorman, Marta Minujin, Yayoi Kusama, and I persist in making an admixture of objects, installations, and actions.

I began shooting my erotic film, Fuses, in 1964 (see fig. 3). Since my deepest expressive and responsive life core was considered obscene, I thought I had better see what it looked like in my own vision. I had never seen any erotica or pornography that approached what lived sexuality felt like. I taught myself to make films with borrowed wind-up Bolexes; this meant that any lovemaking sequence had thirty seconds of film time.

The need to see, to confront sexual shibboleths was also an underlying motive for my performance *Interior Scroll*, more than ten years later, in 1975. ⁴ I didn't want to pull a scroll out of my vagina and read it in public, but the culture's terror of my making overt what it wished to suppress fueled

FIG. 3 Carolee Schneemann, *Unexpectedly Research*, 1963–90, photographic montage, comprising stills from Schneemann's performances, artworks, and other visual icons, 80×68 inches. Courtesy Emily Harvey Gallery, New York.

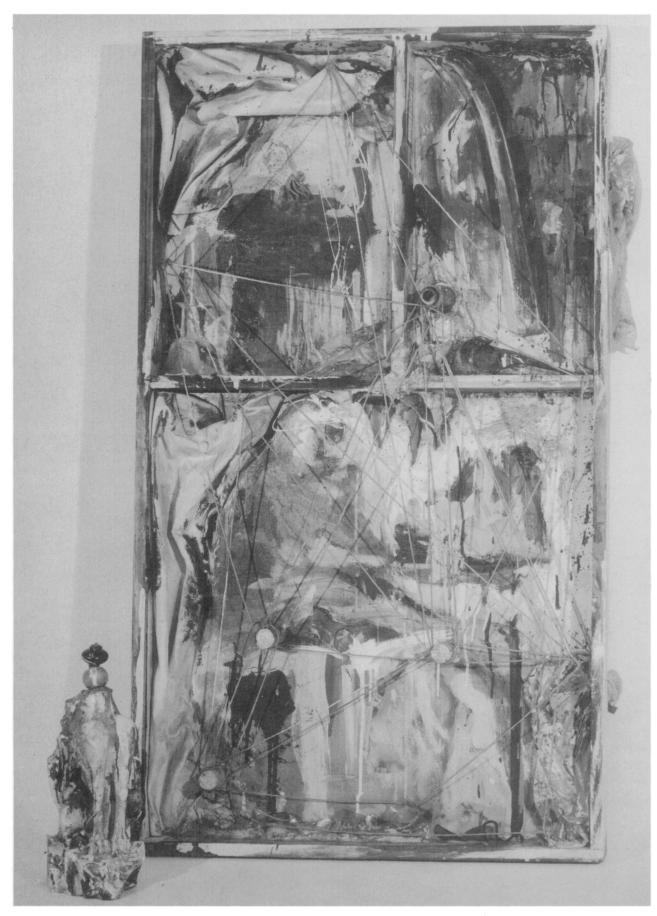


FIG. 5 Carolee Schneemann, Sphinx, section of Eye Body environment, 1962, oak box, bottles, paint, rope, cloth, plaster, $50 \times 28 \times 4$ inches. Collection of the artist.

the image; it was essential to demonstrate this lived action about "vulvic space" against the abstraction of the female body and its loss of meanings (see fig. 3).

I thought of the vagina in many ways—physically, conceptually, as a sculptural form, an architectural referent, the source of sacred knowledge, ecstasy, birth passage, transformation. I saw the vagina as a translucent chamber of which the serpent was an outward model, enlivened by its passage from the visible to the invisible: a spiraled coil ringed with the shape of desire and generative mysteries, with attributes of both female and male sexual powers. This source of interior knowledge could be symbolized as the primary index unifying spirit and flesh in Goddess worship. I related womb and vagina to primary knowledge, recorded as earliest history with strokes and cuts on bone and rock. By these marks, I believe, my ancestor measured her menstrual cycles, pregnancies, lunar observations, agricultural notations—the origins of time factoring, of mathematical equivalences, of abstract relations.

Censorship and pornography are blood brothers. We will never find one without the other. If my paintings, photographs, film, and enacted works have been judged obscene, the question arises: is this because I use the body in its actuality—without contrivance, fetishization, displacement? Is this because my photographic works are usually self-shot, without an external, controlling eye? And are these works obscene because I posit my female body as a locus of autonomy, pleasure, desire; and insist that as an artist I can be both image and image maker, merging two aspects of a self deeply fractured in the contemporary imagination?

The prohibition of performance works with anti-Vietnam War themes in the 1960s and early 1970s was most extreme. When an audience for my Kinetic Theater piece Illinois Central (Chicago, 1968) was prevented by authorities from seeing the performance, the United States Information Agency, the fire department, police, local real-estate executives, and the sponsoring staff and trustees of the Museum of Contemporary Art were involved. *Illinois Central* developed from my anti-Vietnam War performance Snows. 5 Snows had been performed at the Martinique Theater, in Greelev Square in New York, as part of Angry Arts Week, February 1967. A collaboration with Bell Telephone Labs permitted the development of an electronic switching system for the performance, by means of which audience reactions could trigger electrical relays to activate 16-mm projectors edging the stage, tape decks with collaged sound, revolving lights, and, in turn, the cues for six performers. Central to Snows was my film Viet-Flakes, composed from an obsessive collection of Vietnam atrocity images I had clipped from newspapers and foreign magazines over a five-year period. I had taped close-up lenses and magnifying glasses to an 8-mm camera lens to make it physically "travel" within the photographs, producing a rough form of animation. Snows was influential in heightening moral outrage at the war (fig. 6). And while this Kinetic



FIG. 6 Carolee Schneemann, still from *Snows*, Kinetic Theater performance, 1967; ice sequence, with Shigeko Kubota and Tyrone Mitchell.

Theater work was not censored in any overt way, I believe its reputation led to the disastrous interferences in, and eventual closure of, *Illinois Central*. In Chicago a full complement of permits and city approvals was finally not sufficient to keep the fire department from preventing an audience of two hundred people from entering the abandoned bakery loft we had struggled to prepare, over several weeks, with a 360-degree slide-relay projection of Illinois horizons by Art Sinsabaugh, juxtaposed with my slides of devastated Vietnam landscapes.

Illinois Central later toured the East Coast, as part of "Inter Media '68," produced by John Brockman. At the Brooklyn Academy of Music our performance was disrupted by screaming "plants" (police provocateurs) and a provoked fist fight in the audience. Other forms of sabotage dogged the tour.

What agency was behind the passing out of hundreds of cups of "sangria" laced with LSD as I was directing an International Festival in London, in 1969, in honor of the Chicago Eight? Newsreels, films, performances, musicians, and staff dissolved in acid chaos.

My film Fuses has been subject to constant censorship at its showings, despite its special awards in Cannes in 1968 and at the Yale Film Festival in 1972. My art exhibitions have also provoked censorious measures. In 1981 disclaimers were placed at the gallery entrance at Real Art Ways, in Connecticut, for my exhibition "Image/Text"; photo-text works were removed from a group exhibition in Philadelphia in 1976; offending flyers were removed from the Whitney Museum Downtown exhibition "Nothing but Nudes," in 1977. But in some ways implicit censorship is harsher than the overt form: exclusion from exhibitions, denial of grants and teaching positions, the suppression of publicity and controversy itself. 7

It's interesting that two years ago, twenty-five years after *Fuses* was made, it could be both censored and shown

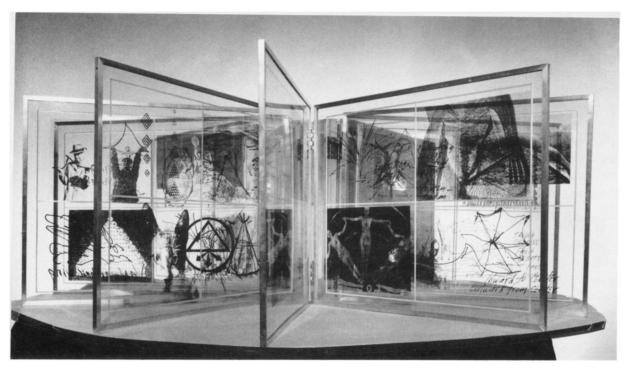


FIG. 7 Carolee Schneemann, Venus Vectors (pedestal version), 1987, acrylic panels, Kodalith film, aluminum, TV monitors, videotapes, 34 × 64 inches.

uncensored at the 1989 Moscow Film Festival, and could receive its most intensive structural analysis in David James's Allegories of Cinema—an analysis in which my motives and methods are fully contextualized (complementing Scott MacDonald's A Critical Cinema).8 Fuses was included in an American-Soviet joint-venture program for the Moscow Film Festival, titled "Sexuality in American Films." (The selections from the United States were made by the San Francisco International Film Festival, which has had a long association with the Soviet film agency KINO). This program presented Philip Kaufman's Unbearable Lightness of Being as a feature, and Trash, by Paul Morrissey, Working Girls, by Lizzy Borden, She's Gotta Have It, by Spike Lee, Russ Meyers's Beyond the Valley of the Dolls, Desert Hearts, by Donna Deitch, Sex, Lies, and Videotape, by Stephen Soderbergh, Mark Huestis's program on AIDS, Obie Benz's *Heavy* Petting, and three shorts by James Broughton. Only Fuses, after an unscheduled opening-night screening, was canceled from subsequent planned showings (and finally screened unannounced, after pressure from the American organizers). Among all these films, only Fuses hit a taboo button in perestroika.

In the United States and the Soviet Union, patriarchal gender constructions systematize the transference and mythification lurking within the idealization of the arts. We are looking at different forms of denial and censorship: one form instigates public outrage, outcry; the other acts as a slow smothering, a constraint. In the former (typically U.S.) instance you may have to fight to protect the immediate fate of your work; in the latter (traditionally Soviet), you have to wait it out, persist, live in the basement.⁹

Censorship breaks your integrity; it's sinister because the work is both physically endangered and engaged in a falsification of motive. In Moscow I struggled against invisible powers and was always the fool because I didn't know where my enemy was. The Russian organizers were cordial,

and gracious, and every day they had increasingly unbelievable stories as to why the showing of Fuses was postponed or canceled. I was fortunate to have a translator who became a defender, aggressive on behalf of the film. Every time a screening of Fuses was diverted he would arrange for TV and print journalists to be present: we would hold interviews about pornography. There seemed to be no context to support a female erotic vision.

One TV interview was conducted under the direction of a small, round woman in her sixties, who arrived at my hotel room with a full crew. She was the head of the sexual-education program in the Soviet Union. She introduced the interview: then Vladimir, my translator, translated her questions and my responses. She smiled approvingly, looking into my eyes as she spoke into the microphone. "What's she saying?" I asked Vladimir. He paused. "She's saying you are a pornographer and a dangerous woman."

Censorship is usually anonymous; you never see its source exactly. Censors are wily and often capricious. Without question, many of my works of the past fifteen years were realized with grants from the NEA, which supported both fabrication and presentation in sponsoring spaces (themselves supported with NEA funds). These performances, films, and sculptural installations could all be considered erotically or politically objectionable at some level of our society. No other Western industrialized country treats art with our degree of paternalistic suspicion, envy, and greed to possess, or uses our system's fitful "allowances" to finance it. (On a recent radio talk program a man called in and stated: "The whole attack on the NEA is a smoke screen. We don't have any more Commies to distract us from government corruption, so let's go after the artist.)

To what extent does erotic content subvert the formal properties of my work? Can its sexual base penetrate existing aesthetic issues with new meanings? The disavowal and proscription of "essentialism" by academic critics has left

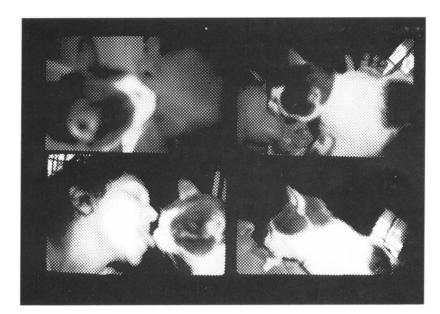


FIG. 8 Carolee Schneemann, Infinity Kisses (detail), 1982–88, 180 framed color photocopies of unique, selfshot photographs, 9 × 12 feet. Collection of the artist.

much of my recent work in suspension. Are there structures of evasion within feminist analysis? How has the female erotic body entered into semiotic discourse? Is the critical neglect of my current work a form of censorship? For instance, is the lack of attention to two of my recent works, the 1988 installation, *Venus Vectors* (fig. 7), in which the unraveling of two (menstrual) dream symbols situates a visual morphology of vulvic form, and Infinity Kisses (fig. 8), a recent photo series of my cat, Cluny, and me that raises the issue of "appropriate eroticism" and interspecies communication, an act of censorship?

Censorship is flexible, responsive, motile, adaptive; boundaries of prohibitions are shifted, redefined. Women artists have been censored by exclusion for centuries. But what about the *other* "Others"? What of the artists so socially marginalized, so ignored as to elude acceptable controversy and *its* possible censorship? While a few of us are bathed in (or blinded by) the lights of a concerned media, entire outreach teaching programs, local galleries, and studio and performance spaces in the unglamorous places we call "barrio," "ghetto," "reservation," "inner city," "cultural backwater" have already been cut off from public funding; they no longer exist, much less make trouble.

The NEA as a government institution is subject to capture by the most rigid, authoritarian elements of the powers it represents. We who are about to be censored (yet again) must reestablish our community to consider the artists among us who are denied overt censorship, relegated to obscurity even before they have made their mark. Definable ethnicity, radical politics, color—social issues that challenge economic ethics disguised in aesthetic issues—may still be denied a place in deepening the discourse. As the NEA functions as an arm of oppression against the erotic, outrageous women, homos, lesbos, blacks, yellows, reds, Jews, blues (movies)—a palette of denial swirls into a politicized mist. A fantastic paranoia floods our vision.

WE WHO ARE ADDRESSING THE TABOOS BECOME THE TABOO. THE SUPPRESSORS ARE CONFUSED. THEY CANNOT DISTINGUISH IMAGES FROM THE IMAGE MAKERS.

Notes

- 1. The words paraphrase Anaïs Nin's. See Carolee Schneemann, Cézanne, She Was a Great Painter: Essays on History, Sexuality, and Naming—Unbroken Words to Women (New Paltz, New York: Tresspass Press, 1975).
- 2. Carolee Schneemann, More than Meat Joy—Complete Performance Works: Selected Writings (Kingston, New York: Documentext/McPherson, 1979), Eye Body, 52.
- The image is reproduced in Lucy Lippard's Overlay (New York: Pantheon, 1983),
 Lippard discusses the connections between such performance works and prehistoric imagery.
- 4. See Schneemann, Interior Scroll, in More than Meat Joy, 234.
- $5. \ \ {\bf See \ Schneemann}, \ {\bf \textit{Snows}}, \ {\bf in} \ \textit{More than Meat Joy}, \ 129.$
- 6. The Chicago Eight trial, following the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention, was itself a famous performance piece. The defendants, charged with obstructing justice and crossing state lines to incite riot, refused to follow court protocol—they wouldn't shut up. Bobby Seale, the one black defendant was brought to court gagged and chained, on orders of Judge Julius Hoffman. For a review of my performance piece relating to this event, see Jonathan Cott, "Play Power in London," *Rolling Stone*, March 19, 1970.
- 7. See Moira Roth, The Amazing Decade (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1983). Especially interesting is a discussion, p. 130, of an interrupted Brooklyn Museum performance of Home Run Muse, which suddenly lost its use of the spacious museum rotunda to ensure security for an adjacent museum dinner party held for Henry Kissinger on the same day. See also Kristine Stiles, "Performance and Its Objects," Arts Magazine (November 1990): 43, on the displacement of art-historical discourse.

 8. David James, Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 317–21; Scott MacDonald, A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 134–51.
- 9. For a general overview of the issues of sexuality in film, see Bruce Elder, *The Body in Film*, exh. cat. (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989), with illustrations of Scheemann's work, 12, 13, and a discussion of the influence of Wilhelm Reich on her, 34–36. See also Henry Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), especially his essay on the performance *Fresh Blood—A Dream Morphology*, 166–73; and William Peterson, "Of Cats, Dreams, and Interior Knowledge—Interview with Carolee Schneemann," *Performance*, no. 59 (Winter 1989–90): 10–23, on criticism and history.

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN's installations were shown in 1990–91 at the Venice Biennale, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, and Emily Harvey Gallery, New York.